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Soviet TV has some familiar views

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ONE of the more pertinent inquiries issuing from Geneva this week came from the network reporter who paused, amid the celebrations, to wonder what citizens of the Soviet Union might be hearing about the arms talks.

A good question that — one worth pondering even if to do so meant to be torn from the spectacle on the home screen of CBS' Dan Rather earnestly asking the U.S. secretary of state about his talk with Gromyko: "Did you think you were talking to a friend and fellow inhabitant of the planet . . . ?"

And who will soon forget all those issues relevant to Geneva unearthed for our edification by the Today show: the sight of Bryant Gumbel discoursing on the illustrious history of St. Moritz and its famed ski slopes, on Swiss watches, and on, not least, that issue of such high relevance to these proceedings: the plight of women in Switzerland.

What similarly significant issues would the Soviets have raised had they chosen full-length coverage of Geneva, we shall never know. Which is not to say that the nature of Soviet television does not give us substantial clues.

Consider the view of the world available to Soviet citizens on Vremya (Time), the main evening news program. Any evening will do: the evening of Dec. 30.

First, Vremya's lead story — which brought us to a steel-manufacturing plant and assurance that the manufacture of steel in the Soviet Union was proceeding apace, thanks to the efforts, skills and overall happiness of Soviet steel workers, a number of whom appeared on camera in witness of these tidings.

The evening news brought us next to a ball-bearing factory at which workers appeared similarly to testify that the manufacture of ball bearings progressed according to standard.

On, next, down for a visit with Soviet miners, to textile workers, agricultural workers, witnesses all, wreathed in smiles.

In deference, doubtless, to the fact that viewers can take only so much stimulation, Vremya proceeded now to another source of evening "news": in which were detailed scenes of happy families, bountifully laden dinner tables, contented mothers, beautiful babies amid pleasant homes, and the grateful inhabitants thereof.

But only too soon do we and the Soviet viewer learn that these idyllic circumstances are far from universal.

For the evening takes us on — after, to be sure, a brief stop to outline the infamies perpetrated by Israel — to the city of Washington, D.C.: to Christmas in the capital, with the Soviet screens displaying those whom the correspondent described as "workers" lying in the streets and doorways, and holding up signs reading "I am hungry," all against the background of a serenely indifferent White House.

This encounter with despair complete, we were transported back to the Soviet Union: back to scenes of holiday abundance, tables piled high with oranges, handsome young people singing and dancing, festive satellites like Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia, all of whose people seemed to be singing and dancing.

It is, of course, no secret that Kremlin-managed news perpetuates steadfastly the central themes in evidence here: the poverty, want, despair and greed that afflict the inhabitants of the West, compared to whom citizens of the Soviet system are the most fortunate of people.

Nor does it take many nights with the Soviet evening news to divine the meanings of certain repeated images:

- The camera shots of bloated military men departing the Pentagon as the poor and homeless of Washington are shown in the foreground.
- Of Americans, coarse-featured and cruel-eyed, standing outside banks counting their money, while the homeless pick through garbage.
- Of British police charging striking miners, clubs raised high.
- Of people lying about the streets of Paris, holding up signs saying, in French, "I am hungry" — which prompted the Vremya commentator to sigh heavily and observe, "Just another day in Paris."

Now it can come, of course, as no surprise that a totalitarian system should distort, should exploit, lie, should keep from its citizens any vestige of the realities obtained outside its closed borders; and that democratic nations, having the blessings of a free press, should do the opposite.

What *should* surprise us — should compel, indeed, our astonishment — is the ring of familiarity in those themes most favored by the Soviets' state-controlled television:

- The notion, for example, that money spent on weapons, on the greed of the Pentagon, is money taken from the mouths of the poor and hungry, from "social programs."
- The idea that hunger and impoverishment are the lot of vast numbers of Americans — a tragedy to which the government and its bureaucracies are indifferent.
- The idea that workers live in fear, that unemployment is rife, and not least that the CIA is the world's chief repository of evil.

Where have we heard these themes before?

We have read them in editorial pages, discerned their hand in press reports, and seen and heard them on our networks.

To watch the networks this Christmas indeed was to witness nearly as many cameras focused on vistors to soup kitchens and on the homeless as could be found in even the most ambitious Vremya epic.

How has it come about that the press of the most democratic nation known to history has come to see eye to eye on these matters with the press reporting for the most rigidly controlled system of totalitarianism known to man — a system famed for the art of rewriting history, and for its contempt for truth.

It is a question that should give us pause.